

FireFighter

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union www.fbu.org.uk

June 2008



**JUSTICE FOR
FIREFIGHTER
PENSIONS!**

**Movement
at last
Page 14**

DEFEND CONTROL JOBS!

**Conference
rallies
behind
control
staff
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GLoucestershire
Fire & Rescue

FBU
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The FBU Building, 100-101, 102-103
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Redundancy Payments: 1999's Rights
Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992

Advance notification of redundancies

When you are notified by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry of a proposal to dismiss 100 or more employees, you must notify the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry of the proposal to dismiss 100 or more employees within a period of 90 days of the date of the proposal to dismiss 100 or more employees.

Defend control jobs!



In the last issue, you read about the FRS response to the floods across vast areas of England last summer and the report we produced on the subject.

I was able to visit the floods in South Yorkshire and Humberside. I visited the scenes of operations and saw and spoke to our members at work. They were carrying out an extraordinary job in extremely difficult circumstances. I went to the controls in South Yorkshire and in Humberside. They were at the heart of that operation.

What I saw were teams of outstanding public servants, professional, committed and caring, determined to see the job through. People worked way beyond what could be contractually required. I saw the same in central and South West England later that summer. Everyone – from the Prime Minister to local fire authority chairs – paid tribute to this work.

And yet in the review by the department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) of the floods, one of their main conclusions – bizarrely and entirely lacking in logic – was to claim the floods provide evidence of the need for regional controls.

And yet they appreciated and valued our emergency control staff so much that they send a letter from the South West Authorities threatening redundancies – without consulting local members – without consulting local officials.

This has been an absolutely disgraceful episode and those concerned should hang their heads in shame.

We have tried to engage on the issues facing control staff. We have asked questions about the proposed regional control centres – what will be the terms and conditions, the pay, the duty systems, will there be trade union recognition?

Unfortunately, finding out who to talk to is no easy task. The Government says they are not the employers now, nor will they be the new employers. The fire authorities say they will not be the employers. The new local



authority controlled companies (LACCs) say they have no employees so they cannot discuss any detail.

Well, we are not having it. That was the message from speaker after speaker at our Annual Conference in Southport. And that was the message Fire Minister Parmjit Dhanda received when he came to our conference and met with the FBU's Control Staff National Committee.

We don't want endless fights. But if they keep attacking us, the FBU will come out of our corner fighting.

I urge all members to start discussions on branches and start building the fightback.

An injury to one is an injury to all. Defend control jobs!

Pensions – movement at last

If we have quite a battle ahead of us on controls, I am happy to report that after

many months of campaigning, it looks as though we've finally made headway on ill-health pensions. New draft guidance has been agreed between the department for Communities and Local Government and the Union and this should mean firefighters' ill-health pensions are protected. Work is continuing on guidance to Independent Qualified Medical Practitioners (IQMPs).

Let's be clear though: should the guidance fail to materialise, we are ready to fight. We will consult with members, and recommend national strike action. But we are optimistic a solution is now in sight.

It was of course a great disappointment to hear on May 15 the judgment of the High Court on the Judicial Review of our three London members. We are now consulting out lawyers about appealing it. We will keep you informed.

Matt Wrack

YOUR LETTERS

Firefighters in photographs were not FBU members

The Merseyside Brigade Committee would like to express our dismay at discovering that in the article highlighting the work our members do in response to flooding (*Firefighter*, May 2008, page 8), there were photographs of a number of firefighters who are not members of the FBU.

The individuals, identified as from Liverpool, are seen wading knee-deep in water and in another photograph pulling an inflatable boat. One of the individuals has been expelled from the Union as a result of breach of rule to which he and a number of others took the decision to instigate tribunal proceedings against the FBU, which included an appeal. The individual and others were unsuccessful in their tribunal and appeal proceedings against the FBU.

Both, however, did work through the FBU strike in 2006 which, I am sure you will recall, was the longest local strike in the history of the UK fire service.

The brigade committee is concerned that such individuals can be portrayed in our national publication as FBU members given the circumstances we have mentioned and the committee would be grateful if you could ensure a similar episode could not be repeated.

Merseyside Brigade Committee

We apologise to the Merseyside membership and officials for the offence caused by the above mentioned images. We had no prior knowledge of the background, affiliation or events surrounding the behaviour of the individuals in those photos.

The article referred to flooding. The only organisation campaigning on the issue of flooding to ensure the service is equipped to deal with major flooding in the future and FBU members' health, safety and welfare at flooding incidents is protected, is the FBU. And those who oppose the FBU are undermining this critically important work of the Union on behalf of all firefighters and the fire and rescue service.

Matt Wrack

→ *Firefighter* welcomes your letters relating to articles published in the magazine. We do not publish letters where an email address only is supplied. Please include full postal address and/or membership number. We may edit letters.

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Win this month's quiz, and win an iPod Touch

WIN
an iPod
Touch
see p22



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Conference rallies behind control members

ROB BRENNER



When consultation fails:
Merseyside rally during
the strike over cuts

Agreement is much-needed boost for brigade's industrial relations

MERSEYSIDE

The FBU and employers in Merseyside have reached an agreement that should give a much-needed lift to industrial relations in the brigade.

Under the agreement, which was reached with the assistance of the NJC joint secretaries, senior managers recognise that the consultation process on staffing arrangements in a number of workplaces was flawed and that fire authority decisions resulting from that flawed process would have to be revisited.

Brigade secretary Les Skarratts said: "As a result of that position agreed by both parties, it was possible to rectify the process breaches and a precedent-setting practice put in place that is intended to ensure that the agreed procedures would be adhered to

in spirit as well as in detail."

The brigade also agreed that consultation will now begin at the start of a proposal, not at the end of a management process. This will end the practice of proposals gaining



'This agreement is vital for the FBU to be able to have the most effective voice to discuss and resolve issues'

**Brigade secretary
Les Skarratts**

management and/or authority agreement before consultation with the FBU. Dubbed by Merseyside FBU as the "fait accompli" process, Les said this "attracted rather than resolved disputes".

The FBU and management will also

discuss and agree a consultation protocol – not a procedure, as that has been done both locally and nationally – that ensures that changes are not implemented before the completion of the consultation process, with that conclusion being agreed by both parties. This is a process for consultative issues only. The negotiation procedure remains intact.

"This agreement is vital for the FBU, on behalf of our members, to be able to have the most effective voice to discuss and resolve issues concerning consultation matters.

"It is an important step in the path of achieving improvements in a number of processes and areas that will underpin the FBU's role as the sole representative voice in the fire and rescue service."

→ More info on: www.merseysidefbu.co.uk

Boost for fairness and inclusiveness

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

The Union has joined employers, chief fire officers and the government in a strategy to promote fairness and inclusiveness in the UK fire and rescue service that will see brigades earn additional government funds if they meet targets on equality and diversity in their workforces.

The move came as a new survey carried out by the department of Communities and Local Government showed that a third of men and women uniformed staff had been bullied or harassed. Over half had witnessed verbal abuse, one in ten physical assaults, and a significant number had seen race, sex and gender discrimination. This behaviour dented employees' confidence and enjoyment at work, with many not able to face going to work and considering leaving the service. Women, minority ethnic staff, those with a disability, and lesbian, gay and bisexual staff were disproportionately affected – as victims and witnesses – of such behaviour, the survey found.

"There are far too many of our members suffering bullying and harassment at work,"

said National Officer John McGhee. "We are frankly appalled at the results of the survey.

"This new strategy is not about denying white males jobs. We are only talking about three women in every 20 new entrants.

"This strategy is about inclusiveness and fairness. It's about all our members in the UK fire and rescue service being treated with dignity and respect at work."

The Equality and Diversity Strategy's new targets are weaker than the Union had argued for. They are for at least 15% of new entrants to operational roles by 2013 to be women and the number of minority ethnic staff across the whole organisation to be at the same percentage as the minority ethnic representation in the local working population.

At present only 3.2% of the operational workforce is black or minority ethnic and 3.1% female. Parity in retention and progression between minority ethnic and white employees, and between men and women, within five years is also being sought.

➔ More info: www.fbu.org.uk

'Efficiency drive' criticised

CUTS FIGHTBACK

The Union has criticised an "efficiency drive" by the recently merged Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service for leaving crews stressed and overworked.

Dave Chappell, FBU representative in Exeter, made the criticisms after the service published accounts showing that it is set to record an underspend of £777,000 for the last financial year. Deputy chief fire officer Neil Gibbins said the level of underspend met the target set by the combined service last year.

BNP poll bid falls short

JESS HURD/REPORTAGE



LOCAL ELECTIONS

The British National Party won one seat on the London Assembly and made a net gain of ten councillors across the country in the local elections.

The far-right party had believed it could win two or three seats in London and up to 40 more councillors. That the BNP did not win more was down to the work of anti-fascist campaigners, including FBU officials and members.

The BNP polled an average 13.9% across 612 council wards in England and Wales.

The Labour Party produced its worst electoral performance for at least 40 years in England and Wales.

Sounding off!

STEVE WATSON

Brigade Secretary Cleveland
Regional Chair North East

Fighting the BNP

Following the political school in Poland (Firefighter May 2008) a number of FBU officials took to the streets of the North East in the lead up to the May 1 local elections to campaign against the British National Party.

The school had been a stark warning of what can happen if the activity of the fascists is allowed to go unchecked.

In Hartlepool the BNP fielded two candidates in wards that had been Labour strongholds. After relative success in recent elections in Middlesbrough, the fascists posed a significant threat to the mainstream political parties.

BNP candidates also stood in other parts of the North East including Newcastle and Sunderland.

Over two weekends at the end of April, FBU reps, some with their partners, joined anti-fascist coalition campaigners on Teesside to leaflet the wards in Hartlepool where the BNP was standing.

On one occasion we came face to face with a group of about equal size, who were out campaigning for the BNP. Although glances were exchanged both groups went their separate ways, nonetheless the scale of their campaign surprised everyone.

Fortunately they were unsuccessful in gaining a seat on Hartlepool Council, but it was very close, with one BNP candidate polling over 440 votes and falling only 50 votes short of being elected.

The other candidate in Hartlepool only polled 70 votes but that is 70 votes too many. The BNP was unsuccessful in both Newcastle and Sunderland.

We may have assisted in preventing a victory for the fascists in the North East this time, but next time we may not be so lucky. They will be back, and we must ensure that we are vigilant and in a position to campaign against them wherever they field candidates.

You can do your part by contacting your local anti-fascist coalition and finding out what is happening in your area.

■ Steve Watson attended the Region 3 School in Poland in March 2008.

➔ For more on the campaign against fascism: www.searchlightmagazine.com
www.uaf.org.uk



'Lift compulsory redundancy

DEFEND CONTROL JOBS

Conference rallied behind emergency fire control members in the South West, condemning the issuing of preliminary notices of redundancy in seven control rooms without any forewarning or consultation with the FBU.

In an impassioned debate with over 15 speakers, delegates said they wanted guarantees of no compulsory redundancies if the "misguided" regional control project proceeds, and they reaffirmed FBU policy to recall conference with a recommendation for national strike action should any wholetime FBU member face redundancy.

They also said they would fight to ensure those working in new control rooms would only work to Grey Book conditions as a minimum and would benefit from FBU recognition.

General Secretary Matt Wrack promised employers seeking to sack any member "a bloody big surprise," and said: "If they keep coming back trying to put the boot in, if they keep attacking us, the FBU will come out of our corner fighting."

"That's a challenge to everyone here – get back to your branches and start building that fight. We are fighting for jobs. We are fighting for fairness. We are fighting for justice."



Fire Minister Parmjit Dhanda discussed regionalisation with control members at conference

Reaffirming "implacable" opposition to the regional control project, delegates committed the Union to campaign against FireControl at "every opportunity". Speaker after speaker highlighted the almost unanimous opposition to FireControl

within the fire service, and the dangers to the public and to the safe and efficient mobilisation and control of fire appliances, personnel and equipment.

"Control regionalisation is dangerous for members at work on the fireground, it's

'One service, one profession, one union'

ORGANISING

The Union will ramp up efforts to organise all uniformed staff in UK fire and rescue services, delegates agreed as they heard that the current recruitment drive had delivered important gains in membership.

In a wide-ranging speech attacking the Retained Firefighters Union, Fire Officers' Association and the Government's efforts to divide fire service staff, General Secretary Matt Wrack said that "recruitment and organising must be central to what we do" and emphasised in particular the challenge of boosting FBU membership among retained firefighters.

"It is A, B, C that the better organised we are the stronger we are. The more members we have the stronger we are. Our aim must be to build

the Fire Brigades Union as the only real voice for firefighters, the only real voice fighting for the fire and rescue service. One service, one profession, one union."

Proposing the Executive Council motion on the issue, the General Secretary highlighted the work TUC Academy Organiser Dan Giblin has been doing to assist local officials in their work and said: "The FBU is the only organisation that will fight for RDS members. We want decent conditions for all. We want decent pay. We want to protect our pensions. We want the resources to do the job.

"We want every firefighter to be involved in our campaigns – regardless of workplace – regardless of duty system – regardless of role.

"Divided we are nothing – united we are powerful. We are stronger together."



threat'

dangerous for your families at home," said Cathy Smith from the Control Staff National Committee.

Sam Rye from the National Women's Committee, in a common refrain in the debate, warned that regional controls were "the first step to a regional fire service". Others warned that the regional controls, unaccountable to anybody, were the start of privatisation in the fire service.

Tony Smith from Hertfordshire said the £1 billion FireControl project was being paid for with "our jobs". He added: "They are not having our control rooms and they are not having our jobs."

Speaking at the conference, Fire Minister Parmjit Dhanda said that he was listening to fire service staff. He said that he wanted to "ensure if at all possible that there aren't any redundancies" as a result of FireControl and would encourage dialogue between the local authority controlled companies running the regional control centres and the Union. But he insisted that regional controls would go ahead.

Replying to the minister Matt Wrack said the Union had "huge concerns" about regional controls and the threats to FBU members' jobs. "We are the voice of the fire and rescue service. We urge you to listen to that voice," he said.



Dan Giblin (right) discussed organisation with members at conference



PICTURES: ROB BRENNER

Matt Wrack: Don't jump out of the frying pan into the fire

It's the employers' choice: pay formula rise or instability

PAY

Conference backed an executive council resolution calling for a rise under the APT pay formula and threw down the gauntlet to employers to deliver it or risk instability in the fire service.

Cautioned that the pay formula would not deliver a "large pay rise", delegates also supported a resolution from Northern Ireland that called on the Executive Council to "undertake urgent investigation with the objective of determining whether the FBU membership continues to be best served" by FBU policy linking pay settlements to the associated professional and technical (APT) group of workers.

General Secretary Matt Wrack said: "We continue to seek the rise due from the APT formula. I issue a note of caution. I do not expect that formula to produce a large pay rise."

Confirming the executive council's support for the Northern Ireland resolu-

tion, he added: "But we also do not want to jump out of the frying pan into the fire. If we were to consider moving from our current position – support for the APT formula, we would need to be very confident about the route we were taking."

"We don't want to take industrial action ever. On the issue of pay we avoided it for 24 years. That's industrial peace. We did so because we had a pay formula which delivered stability. The challenge is on employers – do they want stability or not?"

Setting out the context of the FBU's pay negotiations, the General Secretary criticised the anti-inflationary policies of the Government as a "weapon of choice in squeezing public sector workers," pointing out that there was no link between public sector pay settlements and inflation.

Slamming the Government as "disgraceful" for employing workers in the public sector such as the civil service on poverty rates of pay, he congratulated unions who had taken industrial action on pay.



Mick Shaw:
Solidarity is what
being a trade union
member is all about

PRESIDENT

President Mick Shaw declared that the Union was “still going strong” and highlighted some very good reasons why fire service employees should be members of the FBU. In an upbeat address he emphasised “steadily improving” finances, the importance of continuing our recruitment drive and a new education programme for reps.

He said: “If anybody ever needed convincing of the value of belonging to the Fire Brigades Union they should look no further than the London Three.

“Three of our members were left with no income whatsoever for a period of about six months.

“Had they been on their own they would have lost their homes. As a result of being members of the Fire Brigades Union we were in a position to loan them money that enabled them to stay in their homes. And that’s not an act of charity that’s an act of solidarity. That’s what being a member of a trade union is all about.

“Had they been in their own they wouldn’t have been able to afford the legal challenge to the situation.

Pointing to the Union’s legal challenge,

he reminded delegates that very early on the CLG withdrew their defence to one of our arguments that our members had been denied the right to a fair hearing and, as a result, they had their pensions paid again.

“That wouldn’t have happened if they had been on their own.”

Mick Shaw also celebrated the “landmark victory” in the courts on equal treatment for retained duty system firefighters, saying: “It was only the FBU that did that and could have done that and it shows the complete irrelevance of other organisations that exist that try to claim they represent the interests of retained firefighters.”

New policy will equip officials with the tools to do the job

EDUCATION

Delegates backed a new education policy designed to arm FBU officials with the arguments to promote genuine modernisation and to equip them to bargain effectively in a new environment that has seen a shift in bargaining to a local level.

The education programme,

to be delivered with the assistance FBU’s new education advisor Trevor Cave, will include training in negotiating and consultation and will empower union officials to tackle issues such as shift and duty systems, second contracts, wholetime/retained and additional responsibility allowances.

“The first demand, the first requirement of our members is

for us to protect them at work,” said Matt Wrack. “Above all, when we are under attack as we have been at national and local level. That means we need to provide the tools to answer those attacks. But we cannot understand the processes taking place within our service unless we have an understanding of the wider context. And that is built into our education at a national level.”



Debate on ill-health pensions, see page 10.
For all conference decisions
visit: www.fbu.org.uk

Labour policies must change guests warn

GUEST SPEAKERS

Guest speakers John McDonnell MP, Secretary of the FBU Parliamentary Group, and Frances O'Grady, deputy General Secretary of the TUC, urged the Labour Government to rediscover its core policies or risk defeat at the next General Election, paving the way for the Tories.

Highlighting shadow chancellor George Osborne's proposals to ban strike action by key workers as revealing the true nature of today's Tories, Ms O'Grady added: "If Labour is to stand any chance of securing an historic fourth term it must articulate a vision that really resonates with ordinary people.

"We in the trade union movement need to up our game too, doing what we do best – speaking up for those denied a voice, organising against equality and injustice and making a compelling case for a fairer, better Britain."

Echoing these sentiments, John McDonnell said there was one simple reason why Labour is now so unpopular: "There's been no change since Brown came to power." He pointed to key issues such as pay, pensions and trade union rights.

He pledged that whatever Government was in power he and the parliamentary group would work tirelessly on behalf of the FBU and its members.



John McDonnell: No change since Brown came to power



Frances O'Grady: trade union movement must also up its game

Political campaign to ensure safety

FIREFIGHTER FATALITIES

A political campaign is to be launched to highlight the need to invest in firefighter safety and to ensure that safe systems of work are put in place to protect FBU members, conference decided.

The Executive Council resolution backed by delegates called in the first instance for a report to be produced on firefighter fatalities that will consider the impact on fatal incidents of IRMPs, the abolition of national standards of fire cover, training, the shift in emphasis from intervention to prevention and the Regulatory Reform Order.

The report will also consider the impact of the "policy vacuum" in the UK fire and rescue service.

Colombian trade unionists 'live in fear'

COLOMBIAN FIREFIGHTERS

Firefighter Euclides Mancipe Tabares, President of Colombia's Firefighters' Union, told conference that in 2008 28 trade unionists had already been murdered in Colombia.

"To be part of a trade union in Colombia is very dangerous and difficult. Trade unionists live with a lot of fear," said Mr Tabares, who was had been invited by the FBU to attend the conference, along with his colleague Luis Arguello, a member of the Union's ruling executive and also that of the CTC (Colombian TUC).

Mr Tabares described the severe shortage of firefighters, lack of appropriate PPE and

other equipment, long hours and the constant threats that they, and other trade unionists, human rights activists and community workers face in the country.

But he also pointed to victories such as their successful

battle against privatisation and legislation to boost firefighter safety.

The Colombian Firefighters' Union's key aims were to strengthen the wages and conditions of firefighters and the bolster the fire service in a

country where only 20% of the population has fire cover, he said.

Mr Tabares asked the FBU to assist his union's members in areas such as training.

He also reminded delegates that the British Government continues to provide the Colombian regime with secret military aid and urged the Union "to pressure the UK Government to support Colombia in social justice projects instead of perpetuating war in our country".

The visit to the UK by Mr Arguello and Mr Tabares was organised with the assistance of UK-based Justice for Colombia, which campaigns for human and trade union rights in Colombia.



DEFEND CONTROL JOBS!

123 emergency fire control staff in the South West have received preliminary redundancy notices under plans to shut all seven emergency fire control centres in the region and replace them with one regional control. And they are furious. *Firefighter* talks to four of them.

If you were to overhear firefighters in the South West talking about headless chickens, you might assume they were discussing their bosses. But on this occasion emergency fire control operator Rosie Tully is talking about herself.

A mother of three young children, including an autistic son, Rosie has worked for Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue service for 16 years, since she was 21. Now, under the proposals to shut all seven existing control rooms and replace them with a regional control centre (RCC) in Somerset, she's one of 123 emergency fire control staff to be handed a preliminary redundancy notice.

The plan for all South West emergency calls to be routed to Somerset puts a huge amount of trust in untried and untested technology to direct firefighters to incidents in seven counties. Rosie, who uses her highly specialised skills to ensure crews arrive in good time at a fire, flood or road traffic collision, is at her wits' end.

"I'm like a headless chicken. They've taken the floor from under us. The thought of doing something else ... I just haven't got a clue where to start."

Rosie's despondency, though, goes way beyond her personal circumstances.

"I do feel let down personally. But it's much more than that. Look at how we coped with the floods last year: the whole world was looking at us, scrutinising us, and we more than held our own – we coped brilliantly," says Rosie, who is also the rep for control staff in Gloucestershire.

"There were no roads during the floods, so how would a satnav help you launch a boat? That's local knowledge. You don't get that sort of information off a TomTom.

"I dread to think what would have happened if we hadn't been there. They would have been sent all over the place. I think it would have gone very wrong and there would have been more fatalities.


"At the time politicians were saying we did

HELEN DICKINSON DEVON CONTROL

“We’re well trained and we provide a very good service: we take the incidents, follow them through and finish them off. Devon’s a popular holiday destination so we have a changing population, especially in the summer. Their car might be on fire, or they’ve set fire to their holiday cottage but they haven’t got a clue where they are so they’ll give you the wrong road name or number. Our local knowledge comes to the fore then, and you can hear the relief in their voice when they realise we know where they are. We’re members of the public, too, and we’re tax-payers. We don’t want to be stuck in a car after a collision and have to wait while the wrong fire engine is mobilised, sitting there trapped for hours, as satnav sends the wrong fire engine in the wrong direction.”



Kelly Vincent, Helen Dickinson, Val Hampshire and Rosie Tully (foreground)

 **Department for Work and Pensions**
DWP
www.dwp.gov.uk

Redundancy Payments Directorate, 228 & 229
Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1964

Advance notification of redundancies

When you are required to do

1. This is required to be to notify the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry of a proposed to dismiss 20 or more employees at one establishment within a period of 90 days or less.
2. Employees are notified of any dismissal of dismissal are notified.
3. This must notify in writing any employee of dismissal are notified.
4. You must send a copy of this notification to the representatives of any employees being dismissed.
5. You must send a copy of this notification to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

KELLY VINCENT

AVON CONTROL

“We all love our jobs, we’ve done a lot of training, we’re good at it and we don’t want to leave the service, but it’s not going to work as a regional control. At the moment we have trained, dedicated staff, we have numerous people who live all round the county so we know the area. We get a lot of holidaymakers in the region and they don’t know where they are half the time and we’re able to question them with landmarks and different things. In the regional control there are so many duplicates of different areas, places with the same name in different counties, that it’s not easy to know where they are. But it is easy to mobilise an appliance to an incorrect location. I’d hate to see lives lost as a result of it.”

a fantastic job. I’m really angry about it. They say one thing to the cameras and in the next breath they’re forcing the closure through, costing millions and millions of pounds that could be so much better spent on other things.”

The Government’s FireControl project has been condemned from all quarters: fire-fighters of all ranks and roles, the FBU and other trade unions, politicians, members of the public, and even, privately, by senior fire officers. Similar plans in Scotland have been rejected as unworkable. Yet the government is pressing ahead.

Already the plans are two and a half years behind schedule, costs are rocketing and John Drake, the FBU’s regional secretary for the South West, has an easy task to shoot down the flawed proposals.

“They say the world has changed since 9/11, that they need extra security, yet the current Somerset control has no security whatsoever,” he says. “If security is so important, surely it should apply to every control centre in the country?”

“They say the regional control centre must not be built on a flood plain, under a flight path and must be relatively remote. The new site is on a flood plain, under a flight path, and on one side you have the M5, whilst there’s a huge housing estate on the other – it’s hardly remote.

“They say they have new technology that will save lives. The technology that’s going to go in there is untried, untested anywhere in the world. The components are all around in one form or another but they’ve never been bolted on to one another.

“And it’s one thing to be delayed receiving

a benefit; it’s quite another to be delayed receiving help if your house is on fire. We’ve nothing against new technology, but it needs to improve the service, and there’s nothing here to suggest it will.”

Says Sharon Riley, executive council member for control staff: “What the Government have failed to realise here is when the last person to leave the local control room has switched the light off and closed the door, there is no going back!

“If the RCCs fail, and there are those within the project who have concerns over their ability to be able to function as one RCC let alone linked to another eight! Then there really isn’t a plan B. We provide a very professional and well respected emergency service. Already members are considering their options.”

What has made matters worse is the way the announcement of plans to axe 123 emergency fire control jobs in the South West was made: in a press release in March, without any consultation with staff or local FBU officials.

Like John Drake and Sharon Riley, Tam McFarlane, the FBU’s executive council member for the South West, is “appalled” at the way fire authorities have approached the whole issue.

“If fire authorities had any regard for the fire control operators that they employ they would have given them proper reassurances for their future at the earliest opportunity.

“It’s difficult to see how any member can make a decision on their future employment options without knowing what the pay, conditions of service, shift system, relocation package and relocation opportunity would be.

“Clearly if these issues had been dealt with

Rosie Tully: let down personally and fearful lives will be lost



Avon control staff: only members across seven control rooms with jobs guaranteed



VAL HAMPSHIRE

WILTSHIRE CONTROL AND FBU SOUTH WEST REGIONAL TREASURER

“I’m absolutely furious they’re not listening to us. It’s going to affect me hugely because I’m a single parent and I have no idea what I’m going to do after 22 years at Wiltshire control. My daughter’s 16 and looking to go to university. I don’t know if I can afford to send her there. I’ve a mortgage I need to pay. I’m disgusted by my employers. They’re not treating us like people. The new regional control centre isn’t going to work. To get rid of us and say they can get a computer to do it better ... the computer is only as good as the person operating it. What the public is going to end up getting is a half-hearted call centre system. It’ll take a lot longer to take calls, there won’t be the staff there to take calls. Gordon Brown says he’s listening, but he isn’t. If he was, he’d have scrapped this a long time ago.”



at the start of the project then managers would have been able to put together an attractive package of improved pay and conditions which would have led many experienced control members to consider applying for a post within any future RCC.

“If individual fire and rescues services had at the same time offered redeployment options for any member not wishing to transfer to the RCC, then our members would have had a substantial degree of peace of mind instead of the fear and worry currently upon them.

“Instead, fire authorities have been scuttling about sending out mass [preliminary] redundancy notices. It is disgraceful and shameful. It’s time to re-think this whole project – it’s been a shambles since day one.”

Of the seven fire authorities in the region only one – Avon – has guaranteed staff will not lose jobs.

“That shows it can be done,” says Tam McFarlane. “Others should follow suit and give their staff peace of mind.”

This is a view shared by Rosie Tully, who thinks Gloucester’s MP – and Fire Minister – Parmjit Dhanda may well pay with his job at the next election.

“He’s not listening to his constituents. People are really, really angry about this. It’s not best for the people of Gloucestershire and they know it.

“They’ve been calling on Parmjit to do something about it and he’s turned his back on them.”

PAUL BOX

DEFEND CONTROL JOBS
AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL

Movement at last on protection



Seriously injured and disabled firefighters should see their ill-health pensions protected, following an agreement between the Union and the department for Communities and Local Government (CLG).

As *Firefighter* went to press, agreement had been reached on a draft circular addressing the main concerns with the CLG rules on ill-health retirement under the Firefighters' Pension Scheme and work was continuing on guidance to independent qualified medical practitioners (IQMPs). The draft circular will revise the guidance that effectively meant that injured firefighters could be denied both a job and a pension.

The FBU's Annual Conference, meeting in Southport in May 20-23, welcomed the agreement contained in draft documents that were circulated to delegates.

But General Secretary Matt Wrack warned that, should the new draft guidance fail to be confirmed or the Government seek to change it again, or indeed local authorities or the CLG make any other detrimental changes to ill-health pensions, the Union would launch a campaign that would include consultation with members and a recommendation for national strike action.

Pensions removed

The Union launched its Justice for Firefighter Pensions campaign in autumn 2007 after three London firefighters – Martin Marrion, Neil Burke and Andrew Scott – had their ill-health pensions removed. A retained duty system (RDS) FBU member in Nottingham, Mark Padgett, also faced the loss of his ill-health pension.

The Union was engaged in discussions over a period of months with a variety of stakeholders through the CLG-sponsored Ill-Health Review Group and also had parallel direct talks with the CLG.

These negotiations came on the back of political pressure exerted by thousands of

FBU members and officials across the country, who lobbied their MPs, they also followed the announcement by the Scottish Executive in February 2008 that it would amend guidance (issued in May) in line with FBU concerns.

Annual Conference delegates congratulated the Executive Council for their work on ill-health pensions, with one describing the new draft guidance as "a major U-turn".

Matt Wrack told the 300 firefighter and emergency fire control staff reps in Southport: "We are talking about many firefighters faced with no job and no pension. The 2006

guidance opened the door to an end to ill-health pensions. It opened the door to widespread capability sackings. This is about real people and real families, real hardship created by senior civil servants and the CLG. Don't pat us on the back and then attack us on ill-health pensions. It's an utter disgrace."

The General Secretary continued: "If you come back in the future to attack our pensions again, the Union will restart its campaign. And we are not scared of a national ballot. We are ready to fight – take us on at your peril."

Matt Wrack paid tribute to officials and





UNION 'VERY DISAPPOINTED' BY HIGH COURT JUDGMENT

Agreement on new guidance followed what the Union described as a "very disappointing" judgment at the High Court on May 15 in the Judicial Review that the FBU had launched on behalf of the three retired London members.

The court ruled that government guidance issued in 2004 which said a disabled or badly injured firefighter may be given an ill-health pension unless they could be redeployed to a job within their role was wrong.

It backed new guidance issued in 2006 that a firefighter capable of doing any part of their job, even answering the phone, would not get an ill-health pension regardless of whether they were able to be redeployed to such restricted duties.

The three London firefighters initially had their pensions stopped as a result of a decision of a pension appeal board. Their pensions were restored following early legal action but the Judicial Review continued on two outstanding issues. The Union is consulting its lawyers Thompsons about an appeal against the judgment.

members across the country who had lobbied chief fire officers, councillors and their political representatives in the Westminster, Scottish, Northern Ireland and Wales parliaments and "made it possible" to move towards a resolution of the issue.

Onus on fire authority

The draft guidance agreed between the Government and the Union stresses that, in deciding on the case for ill-health retirement, fire authorities must consider whether a "realistic prospect" of "suitable" employment

exists and whether the absence of this would be "material" to whether an award is made. The guidance makes it clear that it is referring to "actual" not "hypothetical" jobs.

It puts the onus on a fire and rescue authority to make every effort, through "reasonable" adjustments, including redesigning jobs within an authority, to enable and encourage firefighters to stay in work within the role if they can, rather than be retired early.

Furthermore, any redesign and readjustment should be consistent with the duty system, a change that the Union felt was neces-

sary to properly protect retained duty system members.

Commenting on redeployment, Matt Wrack stressed to delegates that "any job would have to be within the role – a firefighters' job at a firefighters' rate of pay."

Repeated in the draft circular is Fire Minister Parmjit Dhanda's statement in a parliamentary debate in January 2008: "It was never the Government's intention for an injured firefighter not to receive an appropriate award or to be left with no job or recompense."



STEFANO CAGNONI

WHAT DOES A SCOTTISH FIRE MINISTER DO?

Fergus Ewing is not an obvious ally of the Fire Brigades Union. But he has won great respect from firefighters and emergency fire control staff in Scotland for decisions made in his first year in office. The Minister talked to *Firefighter*



During his short period driving the fire service in Scotland, Fergus Ewing has earned quite a reputation among firefighters and emergency fire control operators. And very largely it is a good one.

Within a year of becoming Minister for Community Safety in May 2007, he had scrapped plans for regional controls and replaced the detrimental guidance on ill-health pensions. With a background in business and cast by some commentators as on the right wing of the Scottish National Party, many may not have guessed he would be making decisions that would be warmly welcomed by the FBU.

But this might be a misreading of the MSP for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber who is also a member of one of Scotland's best-known political dynasties. The former lawyer is quite clear he is no socialist. Yet he is critical, for example, of PFI and the "profiteering" it has often brought, backing instead an SNP alternative called Scottish Futures Trust.

Some point to his long membership of a Highland mountain rescue team – giving him an insight into some of the work firefighters do protecting the public and the day-to-day dangers they face.

Ask Fergus Ewing, and he's very matter-of-fact about his approach. "I used to run my own business and my view is the people who know what's going on on the ground are the people doing the work themselves.

"So I can learn things from an FBU representative who is working as a firefighter that I may not necessarily learn from my officials because they are not doing the job – they are advising the government about the job. They are, of necessity, one step removed.

"We in the Scottish Government are [public] servants in just the same way as firefighters or councillors. A willingness to engage with trade

union representatives is pretty important if you want to ensure that the employees' voice is heard through their representatives in delivering public services."

As Fire Minister in the minority SNP government elected just over a year ago, the Minister inherited the previous Labour administration's regional controls project, against which FBU members and officials in Scotland, in parallel with colleagues in

England, had been fighting a concerted campaign.

Last November the Scottish government decided to scrap the project. It noted that the view of the FBU but also "the substantial majority of those who actually run the control rooms – councillors, chief fire officers and other staff – is that we should stick with the status quo".

Mr Ewing, who is now working with Scottish FBU officials and other stakeholders on beefing up the resilience of the existing network of brigade controls, says he was determined to end the uncertainty which had been hanging over the future of the eight fire control rooms for three years.

'A willingness to engage with union representatives is important if you want to ensure that the employees' voice is heard'

Watch manager Lynda Dickson shows Fergus Ewing around the Highlands & Islands Fire Brigade's Inverness control room





PICTURES: ALASDAIR ALLEN/INVERNESS COURIER

FBU and I think I can say we are in agreement on the aims."

Mr Ewing declared at the time of Scotland's decision on regional controls that good government meant "listening and trusting those closest to the frontline". This has also been his approach to ill-health pensions, where powers devolved to Scotland gave him the discretion to amend the detrimental Westminster guidance.

"As someone who has been an employer for 23 years now, the idea that a firefighter who became incapacitated, maybe losing a limb, while carrying out active duties could then be denied retirement on ill-health grounds was as archaic as it was unfair," he says. "I felt this was simply wrong – so did the FBU, the chiefs and local authorities. So I made the decision that we would change the guidance.

"Plainly I consulted with our friends in the UK government about what they are doing. But one of the advantages of devolution is that we can make our own decisions and we decided that we did not wish to wait. We wanted to get on with it. And we saw no reason to delay and every reason to proceed swiftly." The guidance was issued May 1.

The Minister is clear about the FBU's influence on these two key decisions but sees listening and consulting with key stakeholders such as the FBU as a normal way of going about the business of government.

For example, the Minister has initiated a review of the fire and rescue service framework document for Scotland and the FBU is playing a full part in the process. This was not the case when the previous Labour Government developed the first Framework Document in 2005. "I couldn't not involve the FBU and I wouldn't want to shut out the FBU," says Mr Ewing. "How can I argue that

we've had a proper engagement if we were not to consult the FBU. The idea is not one that we would consider for a moment." This is part of broader commitment by the Scottish Executive, which in December signed a memorandum of understanding with the Scottish TUC to work in partnership across a wide range of public policy issues.

Mr Ewing describes his dealings as Minister with the FBU

as "extremely positive" and notes the "diligence with which the FBU representatives in Scotland pursue their duty of representing firefighters in Scotland". He also comments with satisfaction that "this has been done successfully in Scotland without any consideration of industrial action" and predicts "further improvements between the overall relationships in the service".

If Mr Ewing's moves in his second year in office are as positive for the fire service as they were in the first, then his prediction is likely to be accurate. And his good reputation among frontline staff will continue to go before him.

"The Mott MacDonald report – quite notorious in Scotland – had recommended there should be a reduction to either one, two or three control rooms. I consulted widely on this and just before Christmas decided to stay with the eight. That decision has not only been warmly welcomed by the FBU but has also galvanised the fire control room staff who were quite demoralised.

"And it is the fire control room staff on whom we are relying to bring Firelink into working life and ensure that this new communication technology beds in."

An important task now is to build on the "great deal" of joint working that the Minister says is already occurring across Scotland's brigades and controls: "In major episodes from Lockerbie to the Stockline disaster, firefighters from across the eight services have been mobilised to incidents where it's all hands on deck.

"Last summer, we had a terrorist episode at Glasgow airport that was magnificently handled. Had we had at the same time a factory explosion in Glasgow or a major block of flats fire, then that's the kind of situation where the capacity to be resilient is essential.

"It's essential that each of the eight services flesh out detailed plans about working together in the event of, say, two major episodes happening at the same time. It's not for me as a non-technician, a Minister, to determine the details. But my officials are working on this with the fire chiefs and the

'My decision has been warmly welcomed by the FBU and has galvanised control room staff who were quite demoralised'



Sting in the tail

Tips to stop mozzies, ticks and flies ruining your holidays

INSECT BITES

Many serious tropical diseases are spread by insects. Some examples are malaria, yellow fever, Japanese encephalitis, dengue fever, West Nile virus, and leishmaniasis. For some of the diseases, such as dengue fever, avoiding bites is the only way to prevent them.

Mosquitoes are attracted by carbon dioxide, heat, smells and movement. Day-biting mosquitoes can carry yellow fever and dengue fever. Night-biting mosquitoes may carry malaria and Japanese encephalitis.

Ticks usually live in areas of long grass and attach themselves to the clothing of a human when they brush past. They crawl up the clothing until they find an area of exposed skin where they can attach.

Sand flies, the carriers of leishmaniasis are most active between dusk and dawn. But they will bite during the day if disturbed.

Tsetse flies spread sleeping sickness (African trypanosomiasis) and live in the dense vegetation and savannah areas in sub-Saharan Africa. They are attracted to dark, contrasting colours, particularly blue, and bite during the day.

There are several ways to avoid insect bites.

Behaviour

Insect bites can be reduced by avoiding highly infested areas. Many types of mosquito bite between dusk and dawn, so being indoors during these hours can reduce the number of bites. Tsetse flies are less affected by repellents and can bite through tight fitting or loose-knit clothing, so wearing loose-fitting, thick clothing and avoiding infested areas are the best methods of protection.

Insect repellent

There are many types of repellent, but evidence shows that products containing the chemical DEET are the most effective. DEET repellents should not be used on babies younger than two months. 50% strength DEET repellents can be used by pregnant or breast-feeding women, and on babies and children older than two months.

Repellents need to be reapplied at regular intervals, especially after swimming and in hot, humid countries, when they can be removed by sweating. When both sunscreens

AVOIDANCE CHECKLIST

- ◆ Behaviour
- ◆ Insect repellent
- ◆ Clothing
- ◆ Screening and mosquito nets
- ◆ Knock-down sprays

and repellents are used, sunscreen should be applied first and then repellent.

There have been concerns about the safety of DEET, but research and extensive clinical experience suggest that it is safe when used according to the manufacturer's instructions. There are alternative repellents using synthetic compounds, such as picaridin (Autan®) and natural ingredients such as lemon eucalyptus oil (Mosi-guard®). The manufacturer's instructions should be followed when applying these products to babies and infants.

Clothing

When travelling in areas with malaria, wear loose-fitting long trousers and long sleeves in the evenings, as the mosquitoes that carry malaria are most active at this time. When in tick-infested areas avoid shorts and tuck your trousers into your socks to prevent ticks from crawling up your legs. Mosquitoes can bite through tight clothing, so wear loose fitting clothing. Clothing can be treated with permethrin, a contact insecticide which will kill insects and is available in formulations designed to be sprayed on to clothes.

Screening and mosquito nets

Travellers who will be staying in basic accommodation without screening or air conditioning should sleep under a mosquito net to avoid being bitten at night. Nets should be impregnated with permethrin; most nets are already treated prior to purchase. Nets

will usually need to be impregnated with permethrin again after six months of use. Carry a small sewing kit so that repairs can be made if the net develops a hole.

Knock down sprays

These can be used before you go to bed, to rid bedrooms of insects. Plug-in devices that release an insecticide vapour are also available. Insecticide coils should only be burnt in well-ventilated areas and can be useful for campers. A small piece of coil lit under the table can be a deterrent when eating at outdoor restaurants in the evenings.

Treatment of insect bites

Insect bites are usually small, red, raised bumps that are very itchy. Swelling can be reduced by applying a mild steroid cream. Antihistamine tablets can be taken to relieve itching. Both of these are available "over the counter" from chemists in the UK. To avoid infection, keep mosquito bites clean and dry and try not to scratch them.

Ticks need to be removed very carefully. This can be done with tweezers or special tick removers. Grasp the tick near to the skin and steadily pull out the tick being careful not to crush the tick's body. Instructions can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases website at: www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/Lyme/ld_tickremoval.htm

Availability of repellents and nets

Most travel clinics and larger chemists stock a wide range of insect repellents, insecticides and mosquito nets. They can usually also be purchased from specialist camping and outdoor shops.

➔ More info: www.nathnac.org/

SINCLAIR STAMMERS/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY



Mosquito (*Anopheles stephensi*) feeding on human blood.

I've been refused sick pay

Q I am off sick with work-related stress. My employer will not recognise my GP's sick note as the medical statement and is not giving me sick pay. Is this legal and, if not, what can I do about it?

If there is a divergence of opinion between the employer's medical advisor and the employee's doctor over the employee's fitness for duty, or whether the illness has arisen from authorised duty, a possible remedy available to an employee would be to seek an injunction through the courts to force the employer to refer the employee for an independent medical opinion.

A court could also make a declaration of the employee's rights under the contract – that is that the employer is contractually required to refer the employee for an independent medical opinion under the terms of the Grey Book. Injunctions and declarations are only granted in exceptional circumstances and claims have to be made in the High Court or County Court.

In these circumstances, the FBU's solicitors will normally write to the employer requesting that the employee is referred for an independent medical opinion and threatening legal action if the employer fails to do so.

The threat of legal proceedings would put pressure on the employer to make the referral. If the employer continued to refuse to make the referral then it might be possible to issue a claim through the courts depending on the circumstances of the case.



SATOSHI KAMBAYASHI

Legal Beagle

Answers to some frequently asked legal questions that members put to the FBU

Racial abuse/insult on duty

Q I was racially abused by a member of the public on their own property during a community fire safety visit. Can the police charge the member of the public?

A The Public Order Act 1986, as amended by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, creates the criminal offence of "Using towards another threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour which was racially or religiously aggravated".

However, the legislation also provides that: "An offence under this section may be committed in a public or private place, except that no offence is committed where the words or behaviour are used, by a person inside a dwelling and the other person is also inside that or another dwelling".

Therefore it appears that the police cannot pursue such an incident as a criminal matter. However, if the home is a council or housing association property, it may be possible to report it to the landlord who may operate an anti-social behaviour policy and can deal

with the tenant appropriately. This may provide a limited remedy in such circumstances.

Lodging an injury claim

Q How much would it cost me to pursue an injury claim?*

A FBU members do not pay anything to the union or its solicitors, Thompsons. There are no deductions from the compensation you are awarded and you will not be asked to take out a loan to fund your personal injury claim.

Q If I make a claim will it effect my employment in the brigade – promotion prospects, for instance?

A No. It would be unlawful for a brigade to take into account legal cases in considering promotion. We have never heard of a case where anything like this has happened. Brigades, like any other employer, refer cases to their insurer who deal with the case and instruct solicitors. To the brigade, the case is an insurance claim.

Q If I make a claim will it affect my chances of employment outside the fire service?

A No. As outlined above, claims are referred to insurers and dealt with as insurance claims. We have never seen a case where prospects of employment have been affected in any way.

* See *Firefighter* May 2008 for additional Q&As on this subject.

→ Write in with your legal problem to legalbeagle@fbu.org.uk and those of widest relevance to FBU members in the workplace will be selected and answered in future editions. With thanks to Thompsons solicitors.

‘The colours down there

Gary Bankhead tells *Firefighter* a remarkable story of amateur but officially sanctioned underwater archaeology

Gary Bankhead could be scaling the heights or plumbing the depths when he's not on duty – his hobbies include mountain-eering and sub-aqua diving, as well as supporting Sunderland Football Club. He joined the fire service 18 years ago and is now Green Watch manager at Durham Fire Station, fresh from secondment to special projects at Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters.

The prospect of maybe finding “something interesting” on the seabed crossed Gary Bankhead's mind 15 years ago when he first took up sub-aqua diving by joining Fell Divers, a local accredited club. But, many dives and years later, it was to be the riverbed, not the seabed that yielded up hidden treasures – in a stretch of the River Wear flanking Durham Cathedral.

This remarkable story of officially sanctioned amateur archaeology began when Gary and three colleagues from Fell Divers were asked by the Cathedral's resident archaeologist to help with a little local research. This involved diving in a protected underwater archaeological site. Earlier this year, the team found the remains of two old bridges and retrieved hundreds of medieval coins and artefacts from the riverbed.

Speaking at Archaeology Week

The trove included a seal matrix used for marking documents, thought to date from around 1300, and an early medieval ring which is now with the British Museum. These were significant finds: the diving quartet has been invited to speak during National Archaeology Week at the Fulling Mill Museum in Durham.

The divers also helped to

Gary's finds include a seal matrix used for marking documents, thought to date from around 1300

‘There are huge starfish down there which are a brilliant red. And tiny sea slugs that cling to kelp and seaweed’

locate the site of a 15th century footbridge that was washed away in floods long ago. Some of the larger pieces they recovered are now with Durham Cathedral. Gary and his colleagues are now trying to identify where the bridge started.

Underwater archaeology has proved a very rewarding experience for Gary, though he did not, of course, get to keep the treasure. And, as Gary put it, diving “in poor visibility and a lot of dead salmon wouldn't be everyone's cup of tea”.

Such lack of visibility is in huge contrast to what can be seen in the clear waters around the Farne Islands off the Northumberland coast. Gary and his Fell Diver colleagues are regulars in their rigid inflatable boat, which acts as dive base camp.

Diving with seals might not quite have the cachet of swimming with dolphins, but it's hard to avoid around the Farne islands and Gary's not complaining. “The seals are everywhere and it's the young seals in particular who are really inquisitive. They'll come up and bite your fins.” There is one crowded island where seals give birth to their pups and divers get used to being surrounded by young seals. “The second you drop off under water they'll be flying around you like torpedoes.”

Then there are the vertical walls of the underwater rock surface, covered in dead men's fingers (alcyonium digitatum, a soft coral), in waters awash with brittle stars, squat lobsters and crabs. “The colours are absolutely amazing and very vivid,” says Gary. “The sea water filters out red light after a few metres, but if you put your torch on, all the colours come up. There are huge starfish down there which are a brilliant red. And tiny sea slugs that cling to kelp and seaweed. It's quite astonishing.”

But there are, he adds, some “extremely strong currents around the islands”.

Divers always go out in pairs, and, just as when fire crews get sent out on a job, mutual trust is essential, as is staying cool under pressure.

Though fire and water are not meant to mix, there is yet another crossover between the world of firefighting and sub-aqua diving: breathing apparatus plays a vital role in both. Compressed air



Gary and colleagues prepare to dive near Oban on the west coast of Scotland

cylinders are the diver's lifeblood underwater. The deeper the divers go, the shorter the time they can stay under.

“If you dropped down for 20 metres you could stop under for nearly an hour. But if you went down to 30 metres you would only get about 45 minutes,” Gary explains. “You are restricted how deep you can go for how long your compressed air can last.” The stakes are high if you stay down too long or come up too quickly – from decompression sickness to collapsed lungs or worse. That is why training and proper preparation are so important.

are absolutely amazing'



GARY BANKHEAD

Gary Bankhead, with 18 years service, is now Green Watch manager at Durham Fire Station. Gary took up sub-aqua diving fifteen years ago when he joined Fell Divers, a local accredited club.

When Gary first took up the sport, divers used diving tables to calculate how long they could stay down. These days, it's all done by computers which calculate how long divers can stay underwater and how many decompression stops they should make before reaching the surface.

But structured training, making a dive plan and "sticking to the routine you and your buddy have agreed" are all essential to minimise risk. "You plan the dive and dive the plan," says Gary.

Delayed marker buoys – inflated at the sea

bed then shoot to the surface when the diver is on the way up – show waiting colleagues when and where they are likely to surface. There have to be stops on the way up – depending on the depth of the dive. And there's always a precautionary stop six metres before a diver hits the surface.

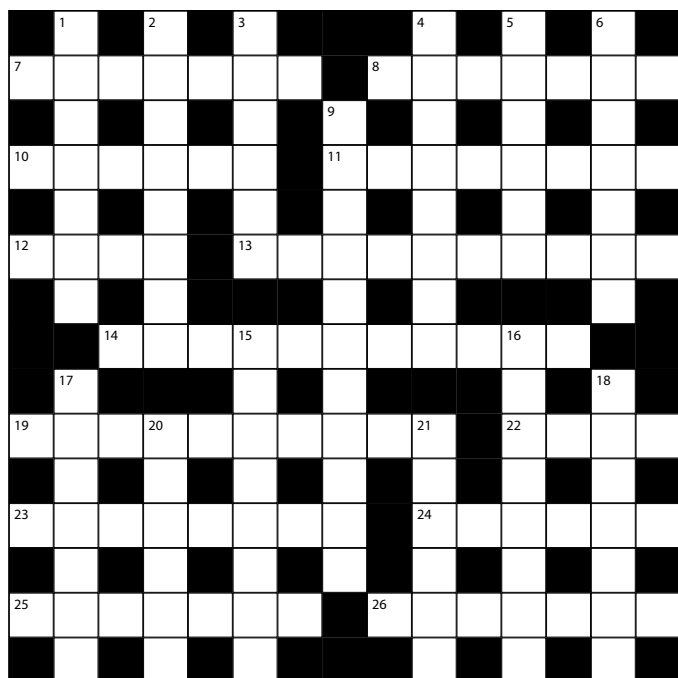
It's about trust in colleagues

Sub-aqua, like firefighting, is a lot about putting your trust in colleagues – or "buddies" as they are known. "It's not remotely competitive. It can't be," says Gary. "You've got to have

real trust in your buddy. Just by looking at them you should know what they're thinking and anticipate what they are going to do. Hand signals help. You can't drift away from them. You've got to stay really close. You could have equipment failure at any time." Gary has had to "air share" with a buddy whose cylinder valve had failed, so both could get back to the surface safely.

Sub-aqua may not be competitive. But there can't be many sports where participants can double up as archaeologists – and get asked to speak during National Archaeology Week.

Quick Crossword

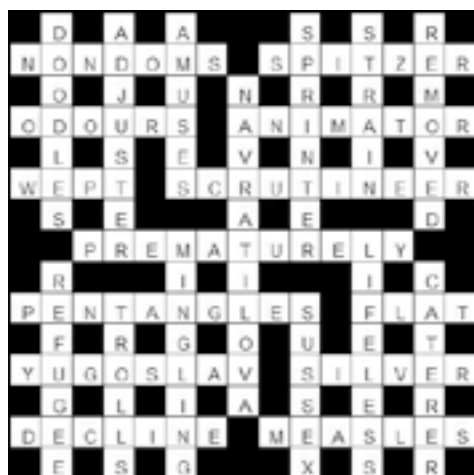


ACROSS

- 7 Held up, late (7)
 8 This evening (7)
 10 Salt solution (6)
 11 Small stringed instrument in lute family, often associated with folk music (8)
 12 Hindu system of meditation (4)
 13 They cover your feet – but won't reach your knees! (5,5)
 14 They broadcast the headlines (11)
 19 Twin-hulled vessels (10)
 22 Trees have it, dogs do it (4)
 23 Common garden flowering plant of pelargonium family (8)
 24 Precious metal (in second place?) (6)
 25 Real, honest (7)
 26 Sporting judge (7)

DOWN

- 1 Six-sided figure (7)
 2 Something to soak your dinner in! (8)
 3 Switzerland's second most populous city (6)
 4 Least old (8)
 5 T-shaped Japanese robe (6)
 6 Gets smaller (7)
 9 All homes should have these life-savers (5,6)
 15 Find trains or tenders at them (8)
 16 Rose up against (8)
 17 Provider of food and drink (7)
 18 Colder than the fridge (7)
 20 Ancient counting frame (6)
 21 Female sibling (6)



Solution to May crossword



REX FEATURES

Prize Quiz

Win an Apple iPod Touch

The theme this issue is British comedy, just name the show ...

- 1 A show about the relationship between a father and son who collect scrap for a living.
 2 John Cleese plays the eccentric owner of a hotel whose Spanish waiter has problems with the English language.
 3 The landlord of a rundown house is envious of one of his tenants, an African prince, and lusts after his only female tenant.
 4 A show which features a lightweight 'wide boy', his granddad and sidekick nephew.
 5 In this 'black' comedy programme two 'gentlemen' play various sketches, one of which features a 'handy corner store' which is not handy at all!
 6 Featuring two champagne and 'Stoly Bolly' quaffing women and a daughter called Saffron who acts more like a responsible adult than her mother.



STEVE FENTON/REX FEATURES



ITV/REX FEATURES

HOW TO ENTER

To win the iPod Touch please send your answers to the Prize Quiz by 31 June 2008 on a postcard to: Prize Competition (June 2008) FBU Head Office, Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE. Include your name, address and membership number. The winner will be selected at random from all correct entries.

May issue quiz answers

1. Sputnik I
 2. Hadrian
 3. The Mayflower
 4. Joan of Arc
 5. 1989
 6. Richard I

Winner of the April quiz was Andrew Mark Turner from Rochdale



StationCat

... brings you the news they don't want you to hear

No change



The brains trust at DCLoG don't want help understanding the fire servicey thingy. Their ignorance is so blissful they want to get rid of as many people who know about the service as they can.

Community fire safety is central to Government policy (some think it's the only fire service policy). It's so important that the National Community Fire Safety Centre was set up in 1998.

CFS has made such an important contribution the centre was shut down last year with no consultation worthy of the name. But never mind, the so-called Centre for Excellence was due to come on stream.

This was meant to deal with DCLoG's ignorance on fire service issues. It is so bad the department does not know what operational guidance – central to the health and safety of firefighters – is in place and still current.

In the last 18 months firefighter deaths hit a 30-year high. Latest operational figures (read the small print, not the "highlights") show a 60% increase in serious injuries.

The "Centre for Excellence" will not be dealing with operational guidance. It's no longer going ahead.

Expect nothing of substance on operational guidance until 2010 and don't have high hopes even then. Almost all resources are going into efforts to make FireControl work.

Remote control?



The penny is close to finally dropping that having a complicated range of localised IRMPs makes the FireControl project very "challenging" indeed, if it ever gets properly off the ground. And with each regional control centre (RCC) designed to mobilise anywhere in the country it means 46 different varieties programmed into a single networked system.

Any Station Cat could tell them that a national standard would of course resolve those problems. That is too simple and sensible for the many inhabitants of Planet DCLoG who don't understand this firey servicey thingy stuff.

They still think – after all this time – that

a regional control operating under spate conditions will be mobilising appliances to a brigade on the other side of the country. Being that dim, they think everyone else suffers from the same delusions.

Their next challenge is persuading fire authorities they need half the control staff they currently employ. It's only with a ridiculously small number of staff in RCCs that they can get within a country mile of their already bloated £1.4 billion budget.

Fire authorities need to read the small print in the "deal" they are going to be sold. The staffing numbers are unworkably low, but Government is already passing the buck for when things go pear-shaped.

Recent and numerous Parliamentary Questions on staffing numbers make it clear the numbers actually employed in RCCs is down to the local fire authorities and their new control companies known appropriately as Lackeys – local authority controlled companies.

Spin, spin Sugar



Many in Government tell me the Department is being blamed for a range of Government woes from the creation of rubbish spies to police the bin tax to the debacle of home improvement packs. It's just so unfair.

I can assure you the best brains in the department are working overtime on the finest ideas to make Gordon Brown's Government more popular and more "in touch".

The "in touch" agenda is fixed by DCLoG's big idea of holding Cabinet meetings outside London so they can be more "in touch" with people outside the Whitehall village. If you see a group of people wandering around where you live not knowing what they are doing, that's the Cabinet meeting.

DCLoG's second big idea: create a political TV show based on The Apprentice with Gordon Brown playing the role of Alan Sugar. Not long now before the corridors of the Department resonate to the words: "You're a waste of space you lightweight, you're fired".

I'm told that the Department is unlikely to see the end of the summer unscathed. Such a waste of talent, and just as things were going so well, light at the end of the tunnel, turned

the corner, standing firm behind difficult policies, mid-term blues blah, typical bye-election kicking, blah blah.

Data



A key part the FireControl project is collecting ALL the information currently stored on gazetteers and elsewhere in fire services. The data is then to be cleaned up and logged onto the centralised database to be used by RCCs.

Much of this information would be considered very, very sensitive and of clear value to people with bad intentions, which is why their security rating is "classified". What's the advice from DCLoG on how to handle this highly sensitive information?

Very simple I am told: Put it all on data discs (open file format, not encrypted) and pop them in the post. The senior and professional FRS personnel responsible for doing the work questioned the advice because of the high profile losses of discs containing data.

My informants tell me the advice has now been put in writing by DCLoG. Stop your needless worrying, they know what they are doing. **On Planet DCLoG the fairies and pixies look after Government data discs ensuring they remain safe at all times.**



✂ if you have any snippets you think Station Cat should get his sharp claws into email: stationcat@fbu.org.uk

25-year badges



Matt Bliss (r), acting brigade Chair Buckinghamshire, White Watch Great Holm fire station, receives his 25-year badge from General Secretary Matt Wrack



Shaun O'Neill (l), Rochdale (GMC) borough community fire safety officer, receives his 25-year badge from Dave Chrimes, brigade health and safety rep



Graham Ashworth (l) blue watch Rochdale (GMC) receives his 25-year badge from Dave Chrimes, brigade health and safety rep



Micky Forrest (l) Washington, Tyne and Wear, receives his 25-year badge from brigade Chair Dave Turner



Dave Wright, CFS Wallasey (r) receives his 25-year badge from Mark Rowe, Assistant Brigade Secretary Merseyside



Strathclyde Control Operators (l-r) Brian Carlin, Linda Coughlan, Laura Kemp, Donna McAvo, Karen Wilson receiving their 25-year badges



Tony Walmsley (r) from Washington Hall training Centre, Lancs, receives his 25-year badge from Tony Cavanagh



Steve Dartnell (l) Orsett Fire station, Green Watch, Essex Fire and Rescue, receives his 25-year badge from FBU President Mick Shaw



D McKay (l), Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue, receives his 25-year badge from ONC Chair Allan Guest



M McDonald (l), Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue, receives his 25-year badge from ONC Chair Allan Guest



D Ball (l), Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue, receives his 25-year badge from ONC Chair Allan Guest

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Change of address or next of kin

Advise your Brigade Membership Secretary of any change of address and Head Office of changes to next of kin or nominations for benefits.

FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

0808 100 6061

The line provides advice for **personal injury, family law, wills, conveyancing, personal finance and consumer issues.**

For disciplinary and employment-related queries contact your local FBU representative.

T THOMPSONS SOLICITORS

Please send photographic prints or digital picture files to: Firefighter, FBU, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE or firefighter@fbu.org.uk Please include FULL DETAILS for every picture – full names of everyone who is in it; their station/brigade/watch etc; where they are in the picture (eg: left to right); their union posts/branch if relevant; and where and when it was taken.